

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

**REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE
REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SUBJECT: REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 10TH
FEBRUARY, 2021**

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR J. HILL (CHAIR)

Councillors G. A. Davies (Vice-Chair)
M. Cook
G. L. Davies
K. Hayden
S. Healy
W. Hodgins
J. P. Morgan
L. Parsons
K. Rowson
B. Willis

WITH: Corporate Director Regeneration & Community
Services
Head of Regeneration & Development
Service Manager Business & Regeneration
Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities
Skills Development Manager - Aspire Blaenau Gwent
Marketing Projects Officer
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer/Advisor

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u> It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	

<p>No. 2</p>	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>Apology for absence was received from Councillor J.C. Morgan.</p>	
<p>No. 3</p>	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>The following declaration of interest was reported:</p> <p>Councillor W. Hodgins – Item No. 6 Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme</p>	
<p>No. 4</p>	<p><u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The minutes of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 6th January, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p>No. 5</p>	<p><u>ACTION SHEET - 6TH JANUARY 2021</u></p> <p>The Action Sheet arising from the meeting of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 6th January, 2021 was submitted, whereupon:</p> <p><i><u>Forward Work Programme (Truck Shop, Tredegar)</u></i></p> <p>In response to a question raised by a Member, the Head of Regeneration reported that an ‘in principle’ agreement had been received from CADW to demolish parts of the building.</p> <p><u>TVR</u></p> <p>In response to a further question the Head of Regeneration & Development confirmed that the Tech Board building would be refurbished in any event. She understood that TVR was seeking additional private sector finance, and the fact that WG was refurbishing the Tech Board building would provide some level of confidence to private sector financiers. However, the Officer confirmed that substantial interest had been expressed in the building should TVR not come to fruition.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the Action Sheet be noted.</p>	

No. 6

ASPIRE SHARED APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMME

Consideration was given to report of the Skills Development Manager.

The Skills Development Manager presented the report which provided an update on the performance of the Aspire Programme and associated external business engagement; and the performance information on the BGCBC internal apprenticeship programme.

The Officer went through the report and highlighted points contained therein. To date the Aspire Shared Apprenticeship Programme had:

- Recruited and supported 84 apprentices placed in over 20 manufacturing companies across Blaenau Gwent in addition to employment of 10 apprentices within Council departments.
- 51% of apprentices within Cohorts 1 & 2 (2015 & 2016) have progressed onto higher education/HNC.
- 100% of apprentices on cohort 1 have been employed, of which 67% retained within host employer.
- Framework completed: Cohort 1 –83%, Cohort 2 – 79%
- 100% of apprentices in cohorts 1-5 have had the opportunity to rotate to another company to fulfil skills gaps.

In 2020, 17 Apprentices were furloughed due to Covid. This was the largest number at any one time with some apprentices being placed longer than others. The priority during that period was to support the Apprentices and help them to continue their learning through college, usually virtual lessons and continue where possible NVQ work. In addition, the Aspire Team supported them with their health and wellbeing to guide them through uncertain times with encouragement and open communication.

The Officer confirmed that no apprentices on the Aspire

Programme were made redundant during this period of time and have all since returned to their work place. It was felt that the support provided to apprentices by the Aspire Programme Team, along with employers facilitated this outcome.

A Member commended the report and said it was good to see Aspire being recognised throughout Wales. He then asked whether Tai Calon had taken on any apprenticeships.

In response the Officer confirmed that discussions had taken place with Tai Calon on the Corporate Traineeship Programme. She pointed out that Aspire was initially set up to facilitate manufacturing and engineering apprenticeships, and many of the skills offered by Tai Calon related to the construction industry. However, she was aware that 2 or 3 people on the Corporate Traineeship Programme had progressed to an apprenticeship through those routes. Engagement would also be undertaken with Monmouthshire's Apprenticeship Trainee Programme as they had the skills with CITB to facilitate that area of learning. In terms of other apprenticeships from an internal perspective, discussions had also been undertaken with ALT to highlight any opportunities that may arise.

A Member referred to the fact that of the 30 apprentices, 91% are male and 9% female, and asked how this compared with the situation across Wales.

The Officer explained that it depended on the sector, manufacturing and engineering was a male dominated industry, and BG was on a par with other LA's. In terms of apprenticeships across Wales there was a more balanced approach with female apprenticeships, and there had been many initiatives established to encourage more females into the industry.

In terms of apprenticeships within the Council, the Officer confirmed that of the 10 recruited, 1 was female, and based within Technical Services on an engineering pathway, which was excellent. She said it was about ensuring we go into schools at an

early stage to highlight opportunities and demonstrate the different skill sets required to attract more females into apprenticeships.

A Member sought further clarification on the review of housing and digital pathways.

In response the Officer explained that this highlighted that we have engaged with the Digital and Housing Teams to look at apprenticeship pathway to fulfil what was required by those Teams, and working with Officers and local college to identify what qualifications an apprentice could follow.

The Officer pointed out that an organisation or Council Department had to pay for an apprenticeship in post, and sometimes the budget was not always available. Within the Council, each Department has undertaken a budget analysis to ensure they are able to afford an apprenticeship, not only to fill an opportunity at a particular time, but to become employees at the end of the apprenticeship programme.

In response to a question raised, the Officer reported that visits to schools were aimed at Key Stage 2 Year 6 across primary schools, and then at Year 8 with the Inspiration event undertaken in conjunction with Careers Wales, and also assemblies for Year 10. She said it was intended to initiate communication at young age, but this was dependent on resources available, however, through the Tech Valley partnership there was now a STEM facilitator in place in one of the Borough's Comprehensive Schools to enable more coordinated engagement and raise opportunities thereafter.

In relation to housing and digital pathways, the Corporate Director Regeneration & Communities Services said the apprenticeship programme was a Corporate activity across the Council, and confirmed that any restructure proposals were being challenged to find opportunities for apprenticeships. He said colleagues within the Council could see the value of apprenticeships in building for the future, and it was important for the Council to show leadership

and demonstrate the value in the opportunities we provide as an organisation.

To conclude the Skills Development Manager reported that it was National Apprenticeship week and there were many case studies available to read on social media which provided an idea of the progress made by the young people on the programme, and also the Council.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and the information contained therein be noted (Option 1).

No. 7 **PROGRESS UPDATE: TOWN CENTRE TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

Consideration was given to report of the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities.

The Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities presented the report which provided an update on the work of the Town Centre Task & Finish Group.

The Officer went through the report and highlighted points contained therein. She confirmed that a second meeting of the Task and Finish Group took place on 20th, January 2021, where the Group received a presentation on the Tredegar Advisory Group which included details of how the Advisory Group was established, how it operated and how it had supported Officers and Members to collectively work on the regeneration of Tredegar.

Members felt it would be beneficial to explore the possibility of replicating the approach taken in Tredegar across all other towns within the Borough, and Officers agreed to support Members to consider these options and the establishment of the groups.

A Member thanked the Officer for her work on the Task & Finish Group and said he felt that the Group was making progress. In relation to the recommendation for updates to be reported back on

a quarterly basis, he suggested that these be brought to Scrutiny when necessary.

A brief discussion ensued regarding the timing of updates being reported to Scrutiny.

The Committee AGREED to recommend, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and progress of the Task & Finish Group be noted, and further updates be received as appropriate.

No. 8

USE OF CONSULTANTS

Consideration was given to report of the Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services/Head of Regeneration & Development.

The Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services presented the report which provided information requested by Members in relation to expenditure incurred during 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 on the use of consultants to support, supplement and complement the work of Officers across the Council.

He said consultants were widely used across the whole public sector including Welsh Government for a number of different purposes, and with Blaenau Gwent, consultants were used in a number of way, i.e.

- To provide assistance in specialist areas where there was no or limited expertise or experience within the Council
- To provide independent advice and a different perspective (challenge)
- To supplement resources where there was insufficient capacity to undertake a specific, identified task e.g. because the work has come into the Council unexpectedly, or where the work needed to be progressed within a specific / limited time period.
- To provide training to BG staff to enhance their own expertise e.g. changes to legislation

- A substantial amount of the consultant costs was associated with project delivery and funded through external grants

He said the advantage of engaging Consultants was also that they were only required for a short period of time enabling an organisation to pay for that skill on demand only when needed. This was often an effective use of the Council's resource and avoided / replaced the need to employ additional staff, with specialist knowledge & skills, on a permanent basis.

During 2018/19 and 2019/20 the Council spent a total of £0.7m and £1.1m on Consultants across all services, and the attached Appendix identified those Consultants, the costs and the reason for engagement relating to the Economy portfolio.

A Member endorsed the explanation provided by the Corporate Director for the use of consultants.

Another Member stressed the importance of using consultants wisely and only when absolutely necessary, as he was aware of a number of occasions where consultants had been used and the resulting reports had been shelved. He also referred to the consultancy costs incurred as a result of the test track and Revive & Thrive initiative.

In response the Corporate Director said in terms of the prospective test track facility and the potential opportunity for Blaenau Gwent, further external expertise would be required to support the project which was a large project with a number of aspects that would require specialist and industry knowledge. Hopefully the further use of consultants on this project would be done in partnership with our partner LA's, who were also supportive of taking the project forward and the additional work to explore opportunities. However, he stressed that consultants were only used for specialist expertise or for additional capacity.

In terms of the Revive & Thrive initiative, the Head of Regeneration & Development confirmed that the company was

used to help set up the bid for both the Rassau and Tafarnaubach and this work was now complete.

A Member said looking at the figures over the 2 years he felt that 17.5% per annum was well justified against the amount of investment brought into the Borough in terms of job creation and regeneration.

In response the Corporate Director said the Regeneration Department was securing £m's into Blaenau Gwent, and consultants were used where needed to provide capacity for that work, and he was comfortable that money had been spent in the right places to secure investment.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and the information contained therein be noted (Option 1).

No. 9

FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME: 24TH MARCH 2021

The Forward Work Programme for the meeting scheduled to be held on the 24th March, 2021 was submitted.

The Scrutiny Officer reported that the Community Benefits report would be removed and replaced with the Skills Academy report.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted.